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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results of a tri-level evaluation of an on-going elementary school second language Foreign Language Experience (FLEX) program and explores the potential efficacy of such a program as viewed by the learners, their parents, and the regular classroom teachers. The program was begun in Spring 1982 in kindergarten and first grade in Knox County, Tennessee; instructors were graduate foreign language education students trained in James Asher's (1977) the Total Physical Response (TPR) method of language instruction for Spanish. Students received instruction for 30 minutes, 2 times per week. In the Fall of 1982, the program was moved to another school to include kindergarten through grade 5; it is now practiced in 9 different elementary schools although this evaluation was done in only 5 schools. Evaluation was by three controlled response and partially open-ended response one-page questionnaires received from 405 students, 239 parents, and 18 teachers. Parent/guardian support was overwhelmingly favorable, children reported enjoying the program, and teachers were also pleased with results. The FLEX Curriculum and a sample student questionnaire, parent questionnaire, and evaluation of student in the FLEX program are appended. (Contains 11 references.) (NAV)

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"The Impact of Foreign Language Instruction in the Elementary School Arena: It Does Make a Difference"

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The Impact of Foreign Language Instruction in the Elementary School Arena: It Does Make a Difference

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Introduction

Exposure to the study of a second language at an early age has been documented over the years through a plethora of research studies to have a dramatic and positive impact on children's cognitive processing (Brega and Newell, 1967; Diaz, 1983; Donoghue, 1965; Vovolo, 1967), academic achievement (Potts,1979; Smith, 1967; Wiley, 1988) and linguistic skills (Ginsbury and McCoy, 1981) in addition to their cultural and developmental growth (DiPietro, 1980; Met and Rhodes, 1990). Whereas, this aforementioned research is indeed important, this paper will not further examine these research studies but rather present results of a tri-level evaluation of an on-going elementary school second language Foreign Language Experience (FLEX) program. This research will explore the potential efficacy of such a program as viewed by a population of elementary school second language learners, their parents and the children's regular classroom teachers.

The Knox County FLEX program

History of the program

In direct response to the requests of the Knoxville community, a Foreign Language Experience (FLEX) program was developed by the researcher in the fall of 1981 and first implemented in the spring of 1982 for grades kindergarten and first grade in a local elementary school. Instructors were graduate foreign language or foreign language education students of the researcher who were trained by her in James Asher's (1977) the Total Physical Response (TPR) methodology (stressing an emphasis on aural-oral comprehension of a language with motor output). Second language instruction (Spanish) was delivered to the elementary school students 30 minutes twice a week, followed by an on-site seminar by the researcher and her students conducted to debrief after each instructional session and to discuss and identify instructional techniques, materials and linguistic and cultural content appropriate for the given student population. The FLEX curriculum (Appendix A) included basic greetings, classroom objects and commands and vocabulary and concepts identified though Knoxville City Schools' (now part of Knox County Schools) third grade curriculum. The graduate student language instructors received

three hours graduate credit for participation in the FLEX program.

In the Fall of 1982, the FLEX program was moved to a second elementary school site where the entire school, grades kindergarten though fifth grade, received second language instruction 30 minutes twice a week for the entire academic year. The FLEX program then became so popular by the community that many other schools in the district wanted a similar program. After much discussion with the district's central office, it was decided that the FLEX program would be offered on a third grade level to a variety of elementary schools sites representing the diversity of the communities within the district.

The FLEX program today

Since its inception in 1982, the FLEX program has grown from a one school second language program to a nine-school elementary program. During the past 12 years, most FLEX instructors have elected to teach in the program to satisfy a recommended FLEX practicum experience as an integral component of the graduate programs (masters and doctoral) in foreign language education in the College of Education at The University of Tennessee at Knoxville. After successfully completing a practicum, FLEX instructors are usually given the opportunity to be hired by Knox County Schools on a hourly basis, to deliver second language instruction. All third graders in these elementary school sites have been recipients of a variety of language instruction over the years including: French, German, Japanese and Portuguese. It is anticipated that in the future, Chinese and perhaps Russian may be offered as a FLEX language.

Supervision of the FLEX program has been conducted by the researcher (not part of faculty load but as a service project to the community) as has its evaluation. (The latter usually takes place on an annual basis during the late spring.)

The following part of the paper will present a tri-level evaluation of this year's FLEX program.

Methodology

Subjects

Five Knox County FLEX schools were selected to participate in evaluation of the program. All FLEX students in each of these schools (N= 433), a parent or guardian of the FLEX students (N= 433) and each of the FLEX school's third grade classroom teachers (N= 19) were invited to participate in the evaluation process. Table 1 presents the number and percentage of respondents to the questionnaire given to the subjects to complete.

TABLE 1

RESPONDENTS TO THE FLEX EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

School	Total FLEX student N	Respondents Student N %	Parent N %	Teacher N %
No. 1	88	80 (90.9)	79 (98.8)	3 (75%)
No. 2	40	40 (100)	7 (17.5)	2 (100)
No. 3	55	47 (85.5)	11 (2)	3 (100)
No. 4	125	120 (96)	61 (48.8)	5 (100)
No. 5	125	118 (94.4)	81 (68.6)	5 (100)
Total N and %	433	405 (93.35)	239 (47.13)	18 (95)

The potential and actual evaluation participant numbers were as follows: 405 students; 239 parents or guardians; and 18 teachers. Student absences on the day of evaluation accounted for the less than 100% participation. Percentage of parental/guardian participants could have been reduced due to a variety of reasons including the failure of the FLEX student to carry home and return in a timely fashion the completed questionnaire. And, on the day of evaluation, one regular classroom teacher was absent. Therefore, only 18 of the potential 19 classroom teachers submitted a completed evaluation form.

Instruments

Three controlled response and partially open-ended response one-page questionnaires were developed by the researcher (Appendix B). Information solicited by the instruments included the following: Did the students and parents like the FLEX program? Did they want the program continued? What did the students learn

in class? Did they want to study another language? And, were the FLEX teachers prepared and effective as teachers and classroom managers? There was also room on the questionnaires for comments and suggestions regarding the program.

Procedures

FLEX students were given FLEX language class time to complete their questionnaires as were the regular third grade classroom teachers. The parent/guardian questionnaire was given to the FLEX student to take home, ask the respective party to complete, and return to the regular class teacher or FLEX instructor by the next FLEX class (two days later). Data were later analyzed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

All data were first read and sorted by FLEX teacher, school and type of respondent (student, parent/guardian, classroom teacher). Then, each question was read for each particular group of respondent, separated by school and by FLEX teacher, in order to identify trends among the responses. Notes were taken for each question on the three sets of questionnaires for a more careful qualitative analysis by the researcher.

Results of the Study

Parent/guardian responses

Of particular interest to this researcher was the percentage of parent/guardian responses identified by each of the FLEX school sites. (It is important to note that each of the five FLEX schools in the study represents the same diversity of SES levels as does the Knox County School community.) The schools which yielded the highest percentage of parent/guardian responses (98.75%, 68.6% and 48.8%) were those whose open-ended sections on the questionnaires were thoughtfully and articulately completed.

Overwhelmingly, parental/guardian support of the FLEX program was most favorable. The majority of the parents noted the importance for their children to study a second language in this 21st. century world. Several responses addressed this issue, including the following:

> In a shrinking world with a global economy, it is ridiculous to think our children only need to be literate/ articulate in English. At least the FLEX program is a start in what should be a stronger effort.

> I think there is a tremendous need for people of all countries to communicate and language is a must. It will be beneficial for children to learn all foreign languages that are available to them.

In addition, parents and guardians reported that their children enjoyed the program and actually looked forward to coming to class as evidenced by the comments below:

> Robert enjoys being able to sometimes "talk" with me in Spanish as we drive home from school.

> My child has a wonderful time coming home and telling me all about the class. Teach(ing) me a few words is fun to her also.

> Clare really looks forward to the days she has Spanish! I believe she's learning. So am I!

Concerns from some of the respondents included: the need to articulate the third grade program to fourth grade and beyond;

> "It needs to advance to 4th. and 5th. grades. One year won't make much difference;"

requests for other languages to be taught;

> "I would prefer the children learn Japanese, Chinese or Russian. These are the areas where the world and technology are expanding;"

and a desire for homework for the children

> "I would like to see some homework...brought home so that we might be able to practice at home a little;"

in addition to more information regarding the FLEX program.

Student responses

All but a very few questionnaires completed by the FLEX students indicated that: they thoroughly enjoyed language classes;

> In Spanish, I have learned the colors, seasones [sic], body parts, and ABC'S. They where [sic] all fun. I liked them all. My favorite is colors. I like my teacher a lot. She is very nice. I like learning Spanish very much.

they would like to take another language the following year;

> It was fun to learn a foreign language. I hope I get to have another [chance] to learn a bunch of languages. All of it was fun.
>
> ....That is why I would like it to continue please. Because it's inresting [sic] also. And I rely [sic] enjoy it too.
>
> I can not [sic] beleave [sic] I learend (sic] a foreign laguage [sic] in so little time I did not think I could next year I want germen [sic] !!!! And I want to continue my language class im [sic] taking now.

their parents/guardians are supportive of them learning a second language; they liked their FLEX teacher; and they learned a variety of content in FLEX language classes (language and culture). Most students took the opportunity to expand upon the controlled response part of the questionnaires, completely filling the open-ended section asking them what they learned in their language classes. Many students volunteered that they would love to continue language instruction. Numerous personal testamonials included how they use the language with parents and friends and how not only easy but enjoyable they found the FLEX classes.

Classroom teacher responses

Comments from the regular third grade classroom teachers were mostly favorable and attested to the level of preparededness of the FLEX instructors, variety of activities used in the class and high degree of patience exhibited with the children. Some teachers did express concern that the FLEX instructors needed to hone their disciplinary control of the very-active third graders.

Summary

Based on the results of this research study, it can be concluded that the FLEX program, as evaluated by the researcher, has been well received by students, parents/guardians and the regular classroom teachers in whose educational arena the FLEX program takes place, and that they would all like the program to continue.

Recommendations for further research

For this research study, only five of the nine FLEX school sites were used. Evaluation of the Knox County FLEX program usually takes place on an annual basis in selected FLEX sites, however, it would be of particular interest to compare the tri-level responses from all nine schools in the future.

APPENDIX A

FLEX CURRICULUM

FIRST SEMESTER

(with cultural "tidbits" integrated in every lesson)

Basic greetings: How are you? What is your name? Where do you live? How old are you?
Common classroom objects: chair, table, desk, chalk, chalkboard, paper, pencil, book, door, window...
Parts of the body: head, mouth, eye(s), ear(s), hair, hand, foot, leg
Commands: stand up! sit down! Touch! Go! Come! Write! Pick up! Put/place down! Give...! Show...!
Prepositions: at, toward, in, out, on, under, next to, in front of, behind
Colors: red, yellow, green, black, white, blue
Articles of clothing
Family members: father, mother, brother, sister
Numbers: 1-500
Days of the week; months of the year
Basic weather expressions: it's cold/hot/cool/warm/raining/snowing
Chain of up to three oral commands

Songs: "Are you sleeping?" "One little, two, little, three little indians" Christmas songs...

SECOND SEMESTER

(with cultural "tidbits" integrated in every lesson)

Review of first semester
Chain of 4-5 oral commands
Numbers: 501-1,000,000
Time expressions
Common foods (grouped according to meals)
Animals
Sports
Additional body parts, family members, classroom objects, clothing

Appendix B

FLEX PROGRAM
STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

TEACHER	SCHOOL	GRADE	LANGUAGE

1. DO YOU LIKE YOUR LANGUAGE CLASS? _____ YES _____ NO
2. WOULD YOU LIKE TO TAKE A LANGUAGE CLASS NEXT YEAR? _____ YES _____ NO
3. WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN ANOTHER FOREIGN LANGUAGE? _____ YES _____ NO
4. DO YOUR PARENTS OR GUARDIAN(S) WANT YOU TO LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE? _____ YES _____ NO
5. DO YOU LIKE YOUR LANGUAGE TEACHER? _____ YES _____ NO
6. WHAT DID YOU LEARN IN YOUR LANGUAGE CLASS? _____

FLEX PROGRAM

PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Parent(s) or Guardians,

This year, your child is offered a foreign language two times a week for approximately 30 minutes per class during the school day. Would you be so kind as to take a brief moment to comment upon the FLEX (Foreign Language Experience) Program you child is taking at school this year?

_____ I am pleased with the FLEX program.

_____ I am not pleased with the FLEX program.

_____ I would like the FLEX program to continue.

_____ I would not like the FLEX program to continue.

_____ I think foreign language study is beneficial to my child.

_____ I do not think foreign language study is beneficial to my child.

Comments: _____

Signature _____ Date _____

School _____

EVALUATION FLEX PROGRAM

_____ UTA Student _____ Classroom Teacher

Please rate the effectiveness of the above UT student as demonstrated in regard to the following:

1. Is the student prepared for class?

5 4 3 2 1
very prepared ... not prepared

2. Does the student have disciplinary control of the class?

5 4 3 2 1
total control ... no control

3. How does the student personally interact with the students?

5 4 3 2 1
well ... poorly

4. How are the students enjoying the language?

5 4 3 2 1
well ... not at all

5. General suggestions for the UTA student.

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